

STATEMENT
Senator Pete V. Domenici
May 15, 2000

Mr. President

I've visited Los Alamos countless times during my years of service in the Senate. I've been there for many celebrations, celebrations of their immense contributions that have helped to preserve our national security and maintain our scientific leadership.

Well, I was there a few days ago, and it was no celebration. I witnessed incredible devastation caused by the massive forest fire that is ravaging the area. Thousands of beautiful trees have burned and smoke was rising everywhere. Hot winds were fanning new flames. Thousands of acres of forest were devastated. The lives of many people were shattered. Over 20,000 people had been evacuated, and were receiving shelter with friends and in public areas. Many homes lay in ruins, consumed by flames.

These are homes of people who have dedicated their lives to preserving our precious freedoms. They are true patriots. It only added to my heavy heart to know that the fire was caused by an ill-advised "prescribed burn" in nearby Bandelier National Monument.

In the face of the tragedy, I was immensely impressed with the superb emergency services that were being provided. The State Governor spent a long night in Los Alamos. The Red Cross set up shelters throughout the northern area. The Forest Service mobilized hot shot firefighting units and brought superb expertise, capabilities, leadership and coordination to this horrible situation. The FEMA Administrator was on site. The Secretary of Energy arrived with some of his key staff.

The local emergency personnel were doing wonderful work, trying their best to safely cope with the immense challenge of protecting public safety during a complex evacuation, while also ensuring that none of the hazardous operations at the Laboratory caused additional concerns. The evacuation of Los Alamos took only about half the time anticipated, partly because they had recently practiced an evacuation drill.

There have been many acts of heroism, in which emergency personnel performed critical functions. Many of the lab personnel who manned emergency posts lost their homes in the fire, yet they continued at their stations to ensure the safety of others. People from throughout New Mexico reached out to help their neighbors. Assistance to evacuees from Pojoaque, Espanola, Taos and Santa Fe, along with other communities throughout the State, has been heart warming. Community leaders of these areas, like Jake Villareal from Pojoaque Pueblo and Richard Lucero from Espanola, were some of the first to offer generous assistance.

Given the state of the devastation, it's amazing that there has been no loss of life, or even serious injuries. The fire burned over bunkers full of high explosives – those bunkers provided the planned levels of protection and there were no accidents. Laboratory buildings, which house hazardous operations, remained secure, thanks in large part to years of careful planning. In fact, Laboratory leadership, under the direction of John Browne, deserves accolades for assuring that the Laboratory did not compound the fire-related crises, and bringing the laboratory through the events without significant loss of the facilities they require to accomplish their mission.

In the near term, we need to care for the immense human dimensions of the tragedy. We must ensure that people have adequate shelter, that public health and safety are protected, that public services are rapidly restored, and that some semblance of normalcy can return to their lives. We need to provide assistance to people as they rebuild their lives and their houses.

In the longer term, we need to ensure that the town regains its vitality, which is essential for our national Laboratory to return to full productivity. With the cessation of nuclear testing, the challenges facing that Laboratory are even greater than in years past. Now we've asked their staff to assure that our nuclear deterrent is safe, secure, and reliable -- and do it without any nuclear tests. Our nation depends on that deterrent. We need these patriots to continue their work.

While I'd like to list the groups and individuals that have worked together to mitigate this catastrophe, that's really an impossible task. I do want to especially thank President Clinton, FEMA Administrator James Lee Witt, and regional FEMA Director Buddy Young for their quick reaction to this devastating disaster. FEMA's assistance has and will continue to be critical in helping to make the community whole again.

Up to this point, much of the focus has been on the tragedy facing the Laboratory

and the communities of Los Alamos County, but there are additional dimensions to this horrible fire. It is still burning, and may threaten other communities. In fact, it could burn for months, as dry fuel in these mountain areas is plentiful.

As we are speaking, the Abiquiu land grant has been voluntarily evacuated . Beautiful and sacred areas of the Santa Clara Pueblo are burning or are threatened. We must make the same assistance package being prepared for the Los Alamos community available in these other locations, if this fire damages property there.

Last Wednesday, Governor Johnson requested that the President declare a state of emergency in New Mexico, and President Clinton signed that request within hours. The emergency declaration triggered immediate assistance to Los Alamos, as well as Sandoval and Santa Fe Counties, and Rio Arriba County was added soon thereafter. The emergency declaration provided for short-term assistance including funds for things like:

- ! food, water, medicine and other essential needs;
- ! shelters and emergency care;
- ! temporary housing assistance;
- ! emergency repairs and demolition; and
- ! emergency communications service and public transportation.

Over the weekend, at Governor Johnson's request, the President declared parts of northern New Mexico to be a federal major disaster area. This triggers additional federal assistance from FEMA and other agencies for the following counties: Bernalillo, Cibola, Los Alamos, McKinley, Mora, Rio Arriba, Sandoval, San Juan, San Miguel, Santa Fe, Taos and Torrance.

FEMA has only begun the process of assessing the damage, but the assistance will include funds to help individual families with rental housing, hotel/motel costs and other living expenses. Federal aid also will be available for county and city governments to help begin the process of rebuilding their infrastructure.

Thankfully, it is estimated that 98 percent of the homes destroyed or damaged by the fire were insured. But, there are other effects this fire will have on the community, particularly the business community so heavily dependent on the Laboratory for its existence in Los Alamos. SBA will make available low interest loans to help small businesses pay for their property losses and to cover cash flow shortages or working capital deficiencies because of the fire's impact.

FEMA has completed its initial assessment of the situation in northern New Mexico, and I have been assured that all appropriate federal agencies that can provide support will do so. FEMA will coordinate these activities and work closely with local officials to implement a comprehensive plan. No amount of money can replace many of the things which have been lost during this devastating tragedy, but all available federal resources will be brought to bear to do the best job we can.

Over the next few weeks, we will begin to understand the types of assistance that will be required for the Laboratory and its staff to return to productive work. I stand ready to work with all of you to assure that those resources are provided swiftly and surely.

Unfortunately, FEMA may be called upon to assist other communities in New Mexico, as my State is being devastated by a series of major fires. In the southern part of New Mexico, there are fires comparable in size to the Los Alamos fire. My heart goes out to those people as well, as they work to rebuild their lives.

I've joined a call within the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, together with Chairman Murkowski and Senator Bingaman, to carefully establish the chain of events that led to the horrific events associated with the Los Alamos fire. The Government Accounting Office has begun a detailed investigation. Even with the limited information we have now, it appears clear that major human errors caused this fire. We need to understand those errors and be sure they don't occur again. We may, for example, need to reexamine the procedures for evaluating the safety of "controlled burns."

It's also clear, even with the information we had last week, that the federal government is responsible for this disaster. Thousands of people were impacted by this mistake, and hundreds of those people have suffered major financial losses. Those folks are plenty angry, and they have every right to be furious. In Congress, we need to find ways to make those folks "whole" again, as quickly and efficiently as possible, with an absolute minimum of red tape.

All our citizens owe a tremendous gratitude to the workers at Los Alamos. We won the Cold War because of their contributions. Today we enjoy our freedoms because of their dedication. We need their continued dedication to assure that those freedoms survive for our future generations. And they need our help to rebuild their lives and return to their vital missions.